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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an example of a course evaluation where the evaluation process becomes an important part of the learning process. The setting is an action-learning based course in an executive program. The participants apply a framework (the X-model) for perceiving processes to their own learning. The framework is presented, and experiences from the perspectives of the participants and the instructors are described and discussed. Tentative conclusions are drawn from the experiences of using this type of course evaluation, including the following examples: (1) make a clear distinction between the learning processes of the instructors and those of the participants; (2) put the responsibility for the evaluation of the learning process with the individual; and (3) design the evaluation process in concert with the course content. Finally, there is a general discussion on how evaluation can be used as a lever of learning. (Author/AEF)

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EVALUATION AS LEARNING: COURSE EVALUATION AS PART OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

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This paper describes an example of a course evaluation where the evaluation process becomes an important part of the learning process. The setting is an action-learning based course in an executive program. The participants apply a framework for perceiving processes to their own learning process. The framework is presented and experiences from the perspectives of the participants and the instructors are described and discussed. Tentative conclusions are drawn from the experiences of using this type of course evaluation, including the following examples: Make a clear distinction between the learning processes of the instructors and the ones of the participants; Put the responsibility for the evaluation of the learning process with the individual; Design the evaluation process in concert with the course contents. Finally, there is a general discussion on how evaluation can be used as a lever of learning.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Often the evaluation process of a course is considered as a process following the actual learning process. In this paper an example of a course evaluation is described and discussed where the evaluation process is an important part of the learning process in itself. Having experiences from traditional forms of course evaluation where the participants are to fill out forms to rate different aspects of the course, we (i.e. the instructors of the course) wanted to move to something else. Our experiences were that this traditional kind of course evaluation seldom are useful for the instructors, and even less useful for the participants. They are usually kindly asked to spend a few minutes of their time to fill out some forms in order to help the instructors to improve the course for future participants. Some people tend to spend much effort trying to answer the different questions, while other very quickly answer the different questions: if they "like" the course in general terms they give a high grade in all different categories, or if they did not like the course, vice versa.

With a traditional approach we as instructors ask the participants for help in our learning processes. We want to learn more about the course and about how the next version of it could be improved. One problem though, is that a traditional evaluation form (with graded scales like 1 to 5, A to E, or similar) is not very helpful for our learning. How should I improve the course and/or my performance based on the results from the evaluation? The figures do give important information regarding how the participants' perceived the course, the performance of the instructors, and to some extent how much they learnt and/or how useful they perceived the course and its contents. In our experiences, these results from course evaluations are not always very helpful for our learning, for the participants' learning, or for the improvement of the course. The outcome may include ideas of areas where there are particular needs for improvements, but what do we know about the quality of the results, about the actual learning of the participants?

We decided to start using another type of course evaluation, where we moved away from this traditional form of course evaluation. (Worth noting is that there are of course different types of course evaluations. For the purpose of this discussion, I talk about "traditional" course evaluation, which means a number of questions there the participants can rank the course and the instructors on a graded scale.) We aimed at a course evaluation process where both the participants and we as instructors could learn

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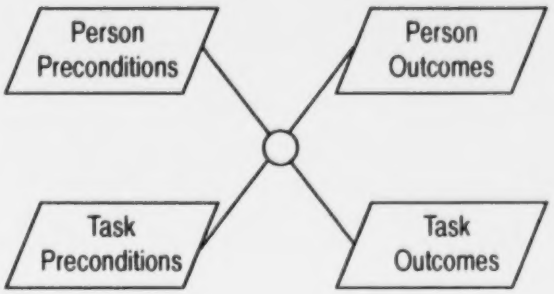
something. We wanted to offer the participants something helpful and useful for their own learning processes, and not only ask them to help us to help future participants.

The result of our efforts was to make use of one of the models for perceiving change processes that the participants had used during the course. Before discussing the setting for this work and the findings from this evaluation process, the next section will describe some theoretical links for our attempts to find forms for evaluation as part of the learning processes of the participants.

FIGURE 1

THE X-MODEL



THEORETICAL LINKS

A Framework for Perceiving Processes

The course evaluation presented here is an attempt to link the evaluation process to the learning processes of the participants. An important additional aim is to produce valuable input for the instructors' learning processes. The form, as described above, is to let the participants reflect at the end of the program. The use of the framework in this reflection enables the participants to reflect on two different levels: on both a task and a person level. In the program several models for handling change processes are used, most of them described in Lundeberg (1993). The model used for the evaluation is a framework for perceiving processes for the input and output of a process and is called the "X-model" (Lundeberg, 1993, section 1.22), see figure 1 below.

The essence of the X-model is: Each process in a business firm includes personal behavior and task processes in an inseparable whole. The main idea behind the framework is to take both personal behavior oriented and task oriented matters into consideration in a change process.

Action and Reflection

The importance of combining action and reflection (see e.g. Schon,1983) is a crucial point in the program where we introduced the course evaluation. Kolb (1984) discusses this combination in terms of "two dialectically opposed modes of transforming experience, one via intentional reflection, the other via extensional action". In order to include both components of action and reflection in our program, the participants work in cross-functional teams in customer projects to accomplish action. For the reflection, the participants use different types of reflection instruments during the program and especially the evaluation process at the end of the program, focussed in this paper.

The combination of action and reflection is one important dimension, another is the combination of theory and practice (see e.g. Argyris and Schon, 1974). In our program the practice-part is the work with customer cases. The theory used is presented at seminars and applied in the customer cases. The reflection will then help the participants to learn from the theory and practice combined. There has to be a willingness to learn though. Schein (1992) describes this like: "Learning and change cannot be imposed on people. Their involvement and participation are needed diagnosing what is going on, figuring out what to do, and actually doing it."

One purpose with the evaluation described in this paper was to find a way for the participants to reflect on their actions and learn. Then this in turn would produce valuable input for the improvement of the program. The difficulties for managers to reflect is illustrated by Senge (1990). He describes experiments which have shown that even if there is time for reflection most managers do not reflect carefully on their actions, but think about strategies for their next action. Here, we tried to build in reflection in an "action item", i.e. the "reflection assignment" every participant has to do before the concluding meeting.

At many educational institutions there is a move from traditional teaching towards new forms of teaching in order to improve the learning. Cowen (1996) describes some aspects of this change process at one major business school. When discussing a learning perspective he says: "the most important point about a true learning perspective is that is may require a wholly different approach to how business schools teach and organise themselves". When trying to break old structures at Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, they, among many other things, introduced new student assessment arrangements and learning plans (Cowen, 1996).

In the next section, the setting for our new course evaluation is described. First, there is a short general description of the course, then the section includes a description of the evaluation of the course evaluation.

THE SETTING

The "Course"

The course is an action-learning based competence development program within the area of Information Management in an executive program. The focus of the program is on handling change processes, and in this particular setting, change processes in the sales-relation with customers. The participants are from the telecommunication industry and each program has 15-16 participants forming three to four customer teams, with one account manager responsible for each team. The other team members come from different units within the organization. By working in cross-functional teams during the program, the degree of mutual understanding and sense of a common mission is strengthened.

Some key issues of the program are:

- It is an "in-house" program within one organization.
- Executives are involved in the program and participate when the projects are discussed.
- There is a "real-life" context, i.e. the participants are to achieve business results in their customer cases.
- Projects in cross-functional teams are in focus.
- Methods and models are included as support for the teams´ work with their projects.

The teams work on projects together with their customers and their mission is to achieve business results from the projects during the program, which runs over a time period of about three months. The cross-functional projects are in focus in the course, and the project work is mixed with theoretical seminars aimed at supporting their work in the projects.

The first step is that every participant produces a personal development plan which is discussed with her/his superior. Then there is a 2½-day kick-off for the program where the working methods are introduced and applied to prior customer cases (including video-taped sessions). The program then consists of three full-day meetings with one month´s interval, where the customer cases are reviewed and discussed. The executives are present at these meetings. Each team has prepared and distributed a written project-report to all other participants in advance of each meeting. Between these full-day meetings there are half-day meetings held where methods and experiences of the participants are discussed. These seminars may include theoretical moments judged to be important to support the customer cases.

The design of the program is briefly described in table 1.

TABLE 1

THE DESIGN OF THE PROGRAM

TIME	ACTIVITY
	A personal development plan is produced by each participant in cooperation with her/his superior
2½ days	Kick-off for the program
1 day	Process-meeting 1: All customer cases are discussed
½ day	Seminar for theoretical presentations and exchange of experiences: Models and frameworks are presented, applied and discussed with links to the customer cases
1 day	Process-meeting 2: All customer cases are discussed
½ day	Seminar for theoretical presentations and exchange of experiences: Models and frameworks are presented, applied and discussed with links to the customer cases
1 day	Process-meeting 3: All customer cases are discussed
½ day	Follow-up discussion with superior Concluding meeting: The final reflective assignment ("course evaluation") is discussed and linked to the results in the customer cases

At the end of the program each participant meets her/his superior to follow-up on the personal development plan. Then before the final concluding meeting each participant is asked to apply a framework for perceiving change processes (the X-model) on their own learning process during the program. These descriptions of the learning processes of the participants are then summarized (anonymously) and discussed at the last session.

Finally, a short note on why this section was named the "course" within quotes. We did not call it a course, but a "competence development program". The word "course", we found, to some people meant going away from work, as a sort of break. We wanted to have close links to the work with the customers and participants who felt that the time spent at the program was their work, although with a special learning focus.

Using the X-Model for Evaluation

At the end of a program we ask every participant to apply the X-model, which they by this time are familiar with from the program, on their own learning process during the program. This means that the focus of the evaluation process is put on their own learning processes. They have to build the description of their learning process with the help of the model and are not given any specific questions to answer. Their descriptions include their expectations, the process during the course, the lessons they have learnt from the course.

Before the concluding meeting every participant send their "X-model" to us and we combine all X-models from the participants into one document. In the process to combine the models we remove all names to make it anonymous. (One reason for this is to reduce the risk that their X-models would be restricted by the fact that their superiors read the summary of all X-models.) The document based on all the participants' X-models is then distributed and discussed at the concluding meeting. This means that there is a discussion at the end of the program where the learning experience during the program is discussed and different participants can compare their own learning experience with other persons' experiences.

Evaluation of the Evaluation

Our own experience, is that this form of evaluation has worked very well. The participants spend time and efforts in the reflective assignment to apply the X-model to their participation in the program. Some of them have made comments on the usefulness of actually sitting down, reflecting on the learning experience.

In order to get a better picture than just our general impressions about the usefulness, we wanted to receive more feedback from the participants about their opinions about the evaluation. Therefore, we conducted telephone interviews with the participants about two months after the program. 13 out of the 15 participants of the program were interviewed.

(One was on a leave and the other person had moved.) By giving them time before asking questions about the evaluation process we reduced the risk to mix up their own learning process on one hand, and the course process on the other hand. The interviews included questions both about the program in general, questions about the role of the evaluation, and their perception of the links to their learning own processes.

By asking about the program, we had the opportunity to compare the findings from the interviews by the outcome from the X-models. That is, would the interviews after the completion of the program add much know knowledge or not?

FINDINGS

Participants' Perspective

The participants describe their participation in the program using the framework described above (the X-model). This means that they reflect on preconditions and expectations both regarding their own situation (person-level) and regarding the customer case their team worked with (task-level). They also reflect on the process, that is, both the process at the meetings and the process during the work in the team. Finally, the participants reflect on the outcome in terms of their own learning (person-level) and business results from the customer case (task-level).

On the personal-oriented level, participants often emphasize development of personal skills which improve their handling of different customer situations and of developing relationships and business with customers. Concerning the customer cases they often mention to what extent these have been brought forward during the program. Below, a few examples of comments from the X-models are presented.

Preconditions

"I had high expectations on the program where I expected to learn new methods for working with customer projects and at the same time meet colleagues from different teams and exchange experiences." (person-level)

"I saw the program as a challenge and as a step in my personal development as a salesman." (person-level)

"The expectations of the program were very blurred." (person-level)

"To work with 'real' cases was great, and to me our customer case was very exciting, as I have other similar cases." (task-level)

Process

"The process-meetings improved over time. We went from organized chaos to organized meetings with focus on specific questions."

"The design of the process-meetings with observers led to valuable comments after the meetings."

"The strength of the program is the common group where similar customer cases can be discussed with persons with different knowledge and experiences."

Outcomes:

"The importance to stop for a while and think about purpose and objective, both for a specific meeting and for a project in general." (person-level)

"I thought that the customer cases should be in another phase - the reality was not like that - processes in business cases in our organization take time!" (task-level)

"A structured approach to customer-related work." (task-level)

"An increased understanding of the process approach." (person-level)

Before the concluding working-meeting we (i.e. the instructors) combine the X-models into one document (as described above). This means a document consisting of about 10-12 pages with comments sorted in person- and task-levels regarding preconditions, process, and outcome. When this document is discussed at the concluding meeting, both personal learning and business results in the customer cases are included in the discussion. At the concluding

meeting there are possibilities for the participants to compare their reflections, and to discuss how to continue the learning process after the program. What then do we learn from this as instructors? This will be discussed below.

Instructors' Perspective

The document describing all participants' reflection of the program gives a very rich picture of several different dimensions. We have found that this form of evaluation links much more directly to the learning processes of the participants then traditional forms of evaluation. Instead of comments on how the participants have perceived the program we get their own reflections of their own learning. This means that they focus on their own learning. If participants are asked to evaluate a course or a program they are asked to change the focus from their own learning process to the course-development process.

From their reflective comments we learn about what they have learnt - and about what they have not learnt (or at least not mention in their X-models). We can see how different messages have been interpreted by the participants, and in some cases also applied in the customer cases. When trying to improve the program, this kind of comments have proved to be very useful. One example is when people made comments about "blurred expectations" we then tried to improve and clarify the information given to the participants before the program starts. The rich picture built from all comments about the learning experiences of the participants, helps us to identify what parts of the program the participants really have learnt and used - and vice versa.

The discussion at the concluding meeting is a very useful supplement to the written reflections. Here, we can follow a discussion where the participants (and the executives involved in the program) discuss the entire program. The discussion is not in terms of evaluate the program, but to focus on what different people have learnt, how the gained knowledge can be applied in the future, how and to what extent the process has been useful for the customer case and for the personal learning.

Results of the Evaluation

The interview survey of the participants confirmed our picture about the usefulness of this form of evaluation. The participants usually had no changes in their opinions about the program. They regarded this final reflection assignment, when using the X-model for their participation, as useful for themselves. Some participants mentioned that they had spent a considerable amount of time on the reflection assignment, as they had found it interesting to thoroughly walk through the whole program and think about everything that had happened during the program.

In general, the opinions about the program were consistent over time, i.e. there were very few differences between the opinions at the end of the program and those two months later. There was one exception though, where there was a shift in opinion between the end of the program and the interviews. At the end of the program there were some comments about the need to reduce the number of reflection instruments during the program. Some participants expressed that it was too many reflection instruments to fill out at every meeting. After about two months when the interviews were conducted, some of these comments had changed. One person expressed this like the following:

> *"Well, I remember that I complained about the number of reflection instruments, but now when I look back at the process I realize the usefulness of them. I must say that after all I think you should stick to the number of reflection instruments next year, but be aware that they will complain too!"*

This comment could be seen as an example of how the usefulness of reflection sometimes is not seen immediately. In the next section, this example and other aspects of the findings will be discussed.

DISCUSSION

After having used this form of course evaluation, our general impression is that both the participants and we as instructors have gained from it. This evaluation is an important part of

the learning processes of the participants, as well as important input for us as instructors when redesigning the program.

The evaluation used for the program is in line with the program in at least two different ways: we use a framework which the participants are familiar with (the X-model), and we use an individual reflection assignment as our evaluation of the program, which is in line with the reflection instruments used throughout the program.

In our opinion, there are two main objectives for this type of course evaluation where the focus is on the learning processes of the participants. The first one is to link the evaluation closer to the learning processes of the participants. The second objective is to separate the learning processes of the participants from those of the instructors.

There are several risks with traditional forms of course evaluation when participants fill out forms with different types of questions about the course. There is the risk of confusing the learning processes of the participants with the ones of the instructors. Asking the participants to give feedback on the course while they are in their own learning process, is to ask for something difficult. The risk is that the feedback neither is useful for the instructors when improving the course, nor facilitate the participants' learning.

The participants are, of course, very important sources of information when trying to improve a course. One challenge for instructors is to find ways to receive this feedback with as good quality as possible, i.e. to get feedback which is useful in the work to redesign a course. We have found that the approach "evaluation as learning" results in useful feedback for us as instructors and at the same time the evaluation is useful for the participants as it helps them reflect on their own learning. This is a help that might be important in accordance with the discussion by Senge (1990) about the difficulties for managers to take the time for reflection. Here they are "forced" to reflect on their participation of the program and often the participants find it useful, at least afterwards, as the example from the interview above illustrates.

One key factor is, in our opinion, that we have put the focus on the participants' learning. Ironically, we have found that by doing so, we learn more as instructors as well!

The description shows that we have found this form of course evaluation very useful. What are the drawbacks?

This qualitative course evaluation may cause problems for those looking for measures which are quantitative and possible to easily compare between different courses and different years. If one looks for that kind of measures it is important to ask the question: what is the rationale of this need? We have focussed on the learning of the participants as the most important, and as a second important component how we as instructors can learn and improve the program.

Is this form of evaluation possible to use in other courses? My spontaneous answer is simply: yes. There are some special preconditions for our use though, which means that the evaluation still has to be tried out in a different context. In our program the participants are familiar with the framework (the X-model) from their work during the program. If this particular framework would be used in another context there is a need for a short introduction to it. As the model is fairly simple and intuitive, this should be possible to do if even the course dealt with something totally different than change processes. This could mean 1-2 pages of instructions and a short presentation of the model when the "reflection assignment" is introduced. In some senses all courses deal with the same thing: to help participants to gain new knowledge during a certain period of time - to learn.

The evaluation described here could, of course, be improved. One idea is to stretch it over time. For example, the participants could be given a reflection assignment during the program, and maybe also a number of months after the program has finished. This could help stretching the learning process over a longer period of time.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND SOME LESSONS

In this paper on evaluation as learning, one purpose has been to illustrate a form of course evaluation which we have used, and found being helpful both for the participants of the program, as well as for us as instructors. One key element is that the evaluation rather is a form for the participants to reflect on their own learning during the program, than an evaluation of a course. When the participants apply the framework (the X-model described above), this means that the focus is entirely on their own learning processes. They perceive the course evaluation, or rather their reflection assignment, as useful for their own learning. As a nice side-effect, it is most useful as a means for improving the future programs.

From the use of this evaluation, where we have tried to link evaluation closely to learning, there are several lessons to be drawn. Below some tentative conclusions are presented:

Lesson 1: *Make a clear distinction between the learning processes of the instructors and the ones of the participants.*

One purpose of course evaluation is to receive feedback in order to improve the course. This means that the focus is on the learning process of the instructors. When participants are asked to give feedback on the course while they are in the middle of their own learning process is to ask them for something difficult. We have found that we as instructors learn more by focussing on the learning processes of the participants. The input from the participants is, in our opinion, of high quality when the participants who spend time and efforts doing the evaluation (or reflection assignment) perceive it as useful in their own learning process - they gain something from it themselves.

Lesson 2: *Put the responsibility for the evaluation of the learning process with the individual.*

Evaluation of the learning process is something personal which by definition must be carried out by the person herself. By giving the responsibility to the course participants, without any detailed guidelines as specific questions, they have to reflect on their own learning process and involve themselves in the process. They have to involve themselves more than what is necessary when answering some questions on a graded scale.

Lesson 3: *Design the evaluation process in concert with the course contents.*

In this case we have used a framework included in the program and let the participants apply it to their own learning processes. When applying something from the course contents in the evaluation process, the learning can be improved and the risk of mixing the learning processes of the participants and of the instructors is reduced, and at the same time it is an example of "walk the talk". The possibilities for doing this varies of course between different courses. If there are no natural links to reflection and evaluation from any framework used in the course, a general model (like the model we have used) could be applied. The difference is that there is a need for a short introduction to the model before the reflection assignment.

Lesson 4: *Clarify the underlying purposes of the evaluation.*

An important question to ask is: for whom is the evaluation done? Is it primarily for the instructors? For the participants? For both? For future participants? For someone else? Traditionally, course evaluations often are for the instructors to improve the course, which in turn future participants will gain from. In our example, the evaluation is done both for the participants and for the instructors (in that order). We wanted to help them to further their learning, and at the same time we could learn in order to improve the program. When designing a course evaluation suitable for the situation it is crucial to clarify the underlying purposes: for whom and why are we doing this?

Lesson 5: *Use the evaluation for reflection to improve learning.*

We have designed this evaluation as a "reflection assignment". Instead of just asking the participants to fill out an evaluation, we have used the evaluation as a tool for their reflection in order to improve their own learning. By reframing "evaluation" the time and efforts spent on it could be changed, and by this also the usefulness of it.

In this paper, an example of a course evaluation has been presented and some experiences from this. There are obviously much more to be done in this area. This is simply an example of some steps in a direction where evaluation is more closely linked to learning processes - evaluation as learning.

ENDNOTE

The evaluation of this course evaluation was conducted as a teaching project within the International Teachers Program (ITP) 1996/97 at London Business School (see Robertson and Morrison,1996).

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